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To Robert Gray Esq
With kind regards
from the Author.

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Transmigration

OR

Farewell Revelations of the Skeleton of an Alligator

A REVERIE.

BY

CAPTAIN J. TRAIL,

LATE OF THE BENGAL ENGINEERS.

"SIC TRANSIT GLORIA" LOCI.

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For the Members of
the Author's Family.

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Transmigration.

Transmigration is considered by the Hindoos as an important tenet in their faith, and may lead even an unbeliever in such a doctrine, to indulge the fancy, by imagining what forms the spirit of any animal, living or dead, may have been in, or into what it may retrograde or progress.

Visible and artificial transmigration and emigration, are also from time to time going on in other of Nature's departments, changing the appearances of places, of old and perhaps happy associations, yet, still all tending towards the progressive improvement of the globe we inhabit, and the increasing civilization of its inhabitants.

Pondering on such things for amusement, has caused me sometimes to wander into the regions of fancy, perhaps beyond what may be generally allowed; it may, however, be more or less entertaining to give a rambling sketch of such migrating and transmigrating reveries, even if too fanciful—the grave, the gay, and imaginative, being all in some degree essential to a pleasurable existence; and, in the first place, I may thus remind those for whom this reverie is principally intended, of an ancient abode, now much denuded of its air of antiquity, by some cruel architect, and every *well-known ghost* and "*Will-o'-the-Wisp*,"

being also drained away or *ploughed down*, (as in many other places and countries,) to make way for Ceres, with her fertile fields and *Free Trade*, which have no sympathy with, no room for, and permit of no *Protection* to such spectral occupants of an earthly and fruitful soil. Under the like treatment of such a goddess, and the advance of knowledge and science, the ghosts of our forefathers must soon die a *second death*, and eventually evaporate or become absorbed, like the bodies from which they sprung, or whose exhalations they were! Though from the respect, fear, and awe, one may have felt for them, an occasional revel of the imagination may still be allowed, without the risk of their *second resurrection;* but merely to recall the associations of former or youthful days and bygone scenes, and in such like, many others may have been somewhat similarly situated. The above may not be an inappropriate preamble to the following *egotistical* and *domestic mythology*, and to the sequent scenes.

It was some twenty years ago, in the ancient and splendid city of Delhi, (the present and last capital of the Mogul Emperors, and their waning Crescent,) that I had the skeleton of an Alligator presented to me by an Indian Prince, and which was said to have been killed in the Ganges ages before, and the dread destroyer of many a victim. I valued it much, and, after preserving it carefully for years in India, brought it home with me to Scotland, and gave it to my father, telling him of its fabulous history. He placed the skeleton in a conspicuous position in his old mansion, which had been also the abode of our forefathers. It was a fit sarcophagus for such remains, having many a story domestic and ghostly attached to it, being a Manse of the old school, in the close vicinity of a very antique country church and churchyard, with, on one side, a *burn*, and deep romantic *den*, in which there was also a peculiar projecting rock, called the "*Fairy Castle*," that was filled with fairies, whose elf-like

forms were often seen flitting to and fro in their nocturnal revels, by the light of the moon or a wandering "Will-o'-the-Wisp," the inhabitant of a neighbouring marsh. On the other side of the antiquated church, there was a smaller rivulet, said to have run with blood for three days after a sanguinary battle, which actually took place there about eight centuries ago, as victorious St. Bride, and the spirit of the conquered Camus must well remember. Here, a few ghostly sentinels might still occasionally have been seen, watching the remains of their fallen friends or foes, and scaring away any unwary visitor of the night, who might intrude upon and desecrate such sacred soil. The stone coffins and skeletons of many of the slain, had, from time to time, been found, and thus kept alive the remembrance of such apparitions; and the shades of evening scarce ever fell, without some reminiscence of such legends and surrounding dangers, which had also been well instilled into me and others by an old nurse, who was most expert in the use of these spectral weapons of attack and defence, to keep us all in due submission to her orders.

After years of absence in the East, I again returned, and found my valued skeleton friend in the same place, evidently having been well guarded, both by old and young, with all of whom it was now a great favourite. Our venerable old parent had become especially attached to it, and had, I was told, looked, and still continued to look at it, as he first passed it in the morning, often with some slight observation regarding it, and his last words on passing at night, (particularly when a stranger might be guiding him,) were generally some remarks about the skeleton, its great size, in length, breadth, and thickness,—its fine but fierce-looking set of teeth, and its ancient amphibious place of abode—the sunny banks, and oft-times bloody bed of the Ganges; and frequently making his grandchildren's or other

youthful visitors' blood curdle by imagining to them, the number of men, women, or children, it had devoured during its long life. The Alligator was now, in fact, considered part of the establishment, and quite a domesticated ghost and family friend! All this enhanced it more in my estimation, and probably prepared my mind for the following spectral reverie, and I had often wished to pry into the secrets of its "prison-house."

It was the evening before I parted with my ghastly friend, probably for ever. The skeleton was before me in all its fierce-like and powerful proportions. I was ensconced in my old "*Indian Chair*," the fumes of a "*Manila*" were hovering in clouds above and around me, and I sat emitting the curling smoke, looking at the fire, and fancying its embers into all kinds of figures. A strangely mysterious hue soon began to pervade my mental frame. In this imaginative mood my eye rested on the skeleton, and musing on it with mesmeric gaze, through the mingled atmosphere, it seemed to expand in size, more like some Saurian of a former age, and to move its horrid form towards me! I would have given the world to have fainted, so as to have got rid of the terrific sight, but vision seemed to become more and more acute. I had been accustomed, from infancy, to all kinds of ghosts, imaginary or otherwise. I had frequently seen them modestly apparelled in *white sheets*, others sitting or standing "*in puris naturalibus*," on tombstones or elsewhere, or taking exercise on pale horses, and death's head and cross-bones grinning at me, and all often distinctly animate, but silent as the grave from which they had arisen. This, however, seemed to be a real one, instinct with life, speech, and action, and of such an extraordinary form and size,—in fact, quite a transmigration of all my preconceived notions of such fearful spectres. Fly or rise I could not, mesmerism seemed to have fixed me in a place, without any power except that of sight or thought, (and, doubtless, it was a

kind of mesmeric sleep, as looking at any object intently for a length of time, has such an influence.) As I thus gazed upon my old and far travelled companion, it seemed to recognise in me its faithful friend and preserver, and to wish, before bidding adieu, to tell me something of its former erratic history, and, if possible, to penetrate the future. Long anxious as I had been for this, I shrunk from so strange an interview with my hitherto silent associate, and with tremulous voice repeated the well-known words—"Avaunt! and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee! thy blood is cold, thy bones are marrowless, thou hast no speculation in those eyes, which thou dost glare with!" But it was not to be scared away, and still glared on. Thus, alarmingly alive to my situation, I was forced to listen to its revelations, and the ghost-like Alligator in an unearthly tone and oriental tongue, addressed me in the following strain:—

"Celestial power, from high, bids us awake
From silence dread of immemorial sleep.
Heaven! (thus from our dreamy maze arousing,)
Reveal to us the past and future state.
But lo! what changes and what transmigration!
Of clime, of form, and feature; from the time
When last, we, in death's slumber fading,
Our eyes, with lustre, gazed on other lands
And streams, those hideous haunts, blood-stained,
Of aged times, with crimes of deepest dye!
Here, home of peace, here, still fond memory clings:
PANBRIDE! Let all thy ghosts, once more, arise
From out their shades, and thus surrounding stand,
And list, and learn from us their future fate.
Hark! to the voice, though from the sepulchre—
The tomb of many bygone, voiceless years!

Once spoken, dumb for ever we remain;
Inspired, we speak, so true, and truth remember.
Mysterious master! Yet, preserver kind,
Still, ever linked by Transmigration's fate,
How many a tearful tale could we unfold
Of ages past? when in the turbid waters
Of our native clime, or, slyly slumbering
On ancient Ganges' banks, we watched our prey,
Of fair woman's lovely, oriental form
Sporting in the stream—nymph of sable hue
And careless garb—her tresses, dark and wild,
With holiest water dripping, and glistening
Pearl-like in the burning zenith sun;
And most, her fragile form all covering:
Oh! feast for gods!
"For food like this a taste!—
Methinks, in some far distant age, a king
We reigned—from Brahma's gods descended—
(Whose high and long descent is lost in myths
Of their mythology,) millions many
Bowing to our will, and queens unnumbered;
Thus love, divided, died.
Dangerous declivity from virtue's height!
We lulled the soul into forgetfulness;—
In banquets sumptuous, in music revelling.
Now, sad remorse—sad, living memory;
Oh! thirst for blood—as victims one by one,
Foul sacrifice, they fell, to fierce desire
Of hunger, and our thirst insatiate—
And warm their blood, like nectar, seemed to be—
Thus, cannibal become! how fury raged,
And passions goaded to extremest hate

Of what we loved.—Ye heavens! protect us
From such evil, and such dire calamities!
Remembrance cruel—yet could it ever last
Unquenchable! (Oh! fallen nature, thus,
One moment's joy e'en such a thought to give!)
Unquenched! 'Tis true! Scarce Terrors' King alone
Could us subdue, by unsubdued desire.
Of longing hunger, and of thirst combined,
Expired our mortal frame,—just retribution!
What now in air or earth could us redeem?
Nought! save by Transmigration's chastisement.
Vengeance to satisfy justice divine!—
Yes, animate, our spirit flees from fowl
To flesh of direst kinds, still us to punish
For crimes on earth and in the waters done.
But thus, for heaven, we trust, to purify.
For such reward, how strangely changed!
The scorpion vile, with sharpest, torturing sting,
The cobra's venemous and deadly fang,
Reptiles with clammy crawl and hateful look,—
My sinful spirit has made animate.
Their sight one's blood with curdling horror chills.
Then from earth, on silky wing, ascending
In vampire—scared by day—darkness its delight;
Or oft, in still, faint twilight's darkening hour,
Lulling to rest, on victim's blood intent,
Cooling, with fanning wings, his sultry sleep,—
A bloody, yet unconscious death he dies.
Again, in airy feathered forms, we've flown;
In vulture bald, of keenest sight and scent,
As, from afar, the fœtid prey surveys;
Or, o'er the dying, exulting hovers,

Till life extinct, in sweeping circles moves,
Descending sure; his ravenous hunger
Feeds, till bloated;—sleeps, yet, to renew the feast.
In nobler flight, on eagle's wings we've soared,
More boldly pouncing on a living prey;
On lamb, defenceless, innocent, he swoops;
Or, oft in wrestling and in dubious fight,
His foe o'ercome—he off to eyry flies
With talons full, the young to feed.
Flight, loftier still! with proud and eagle gaze,
The radiance of the sun to mock, beyond
The highest clouds.

"Again to earth descend.
In elephant's gigantic form we've roamed
Through jungle thickset and o'er burning plains,—
Till by false friendship of two tame ones lured.
Thus caught, to court of great Mogul we're sent,
And high caparison'd that king to bear.
Too near our pristine power and royal state,
(Just like temptation when thus nigh 'tis brought,
Old latent sin 'gain dangerous becomes.)
Some mythic thoughts of what we once had been,
Like lurid light, shot through our haughty mind,—
Strange dreams of past caused envy to begin.
Degraded now beneath the slimy snake!
We! thus to carry kings, who king had been!
Death or revenge expiates such infamy!
Crushed once, yea twice, the thought, but up it rose,
Like curling smoke, a vent to find
In passions jealous and revengeful crime.
Again we fell! by murdering this king.
Flee then temptation as your direst scourge.

Thus doomed to retrograde for justice sake,
Our spirit joined with brutes of nature cruel,
Of forms most various, and of souls diverse.
On land and water, did we fated reign,
Treacherous, cold-blooded, and amphibious.
Oh! vengeance just! and still unsatisfied!
In every element we've been supreme,
Save that of fire, the judgment's last reserve;—
But that, or heaven's kept for future fate—
The Almighty's last eternal great decree.
More scarce can be revealed to flesh and blood.
But Ganges' banks, its dark and turbid stream,
(Through whose abyss we've oft-times wandered,)
The shroud and pall of many a victim's been.
Once, utterance more, Where can my spirit be?
And where now its mortal habitation?
Not again in scorpion's poisonous sting?
In flying forms, or brutes of savage race?
Or amphibious, odious, lizard tribe?
Such retrogressions may heaven not permit.
No! in thee, preserver, we wish it were
Progressing onwards to perfection's height.
It may be so! a labyrinth we view;
'Tis long indeed, and darkly intricate,
And opened cannot be to mortal eye.
Yet, gleams of light at intervals appear,
Some truth to shew amid the mighty maze.
Tell why? Strange gift to thee in India given!
For such a gift! car'st thou so anxiously?
Till now, a lifeless, speechless skeleton!
And quick again to be for ever so!
Why bring it to thy Father's house and home?

Of faith, so differing from our origin.
Befriended there by youth and honoured age;
Whilst thou revisitedst primeval climes,—
Abodes, in which our race from myths began!
Yet, thou return'dst, a last adieu, to bid
A friend farewell! It may not ever be!
The future is not known till time reveal,
And open wide the Portal of Eternity.
Still, truth, most mighty, Transmigration is.
In hope, then, live,—despair not!—cast not down—
Though parting now apparently for ever.
Together most mysteriously we've lived;
Together most mysteriously we're bound;
Together, yet, unto one essence linked;
Together shall live in Divinity.
But now, on earth, adieu! My friend, farewell!
Companion Ghosts! together now depart!
Again to shades of all forgetfulness,
Till resurrection rouse us from our sleep,
In silence, still, we rest—a "SKELETON."

The very idea of such an absorbing and mingled futurity, and of such transmigrations, caused me to start from my visionary state with horror, muttering,—Heaven forbid! And delighted I was to find myself in my own form, and not a cannibal king, or even an Alligator, with the prospect of promotion, by such changes, to more than pristine power and splendour, and with a happier nature; and on looking around, I was yet more relieved to see the ghostly skeleton, like the spectres of yore, still and peaceful as the grave! I candidly confess, however, that I parted with my *transmigrating friend*, with a deeper feeling of awe, regret, and attachment, than I had before felt for it.

I was thus bidding the skeleton farewell, when the *mental Telegraph* was touched by some unknown power, and, with electric speed, wafted me on imagination's swift and airy wings to India, the land of the Alligator's birth, as if to shew me some proof of the truth of what the spectre had revealed. Such was quite in unison with the state of my feelings, and who would not delight to see or revisit, even in vision, that splendid country, and behold the orient zenith or setting sun? Or even to breathe the sultry but ofttimes balmy air, and view India's varied and varying features,—her fertile fields,—her arid plains and deserts,—her vast forests and thick-set impenetrable jungles, inhabited by savage brutes of every race, and birds of every hue,—her mighty and sacred rivers, these Brahminical Bethesdas, swarming with crime-stained devotees and amphibious monsters, and fleets unnumbered floating on their streams,—their waters at times gliding silently but rapidly along, washing away and carrying with them, the sins, spirits, and bodies of thousands, in their lengthened course, from the gushing source in Himaleh's highest heights, to the all-absorbing ocean? At other times overflowing and spreading abroad like a sea, fertilizing the soil, forming islands of the continent, and a liquid path over the before arid ground, or again roused into turbid and tumultuous action, by the winds or sudden hurricane, or perhaps first startled by the forked flash and instantaneous roar of heaven's artillery, portending the coming storm and the wreck of numerous fleets, and the life and death struggle of their crews! Who would not exult at the sight of her lofty abodes of eternal snow—the haughty Himalayas? Whose unscaled heights o'ertop the mighty Chimborazzo, and sink the Alps into insignificance! whose highest peaks, when not lost in clouds, seem to uphold the sky; and undisturbed, yea, unapproachable by living nature, listen only at intervals to the

loud harmonies of the tremulous thunder of an avalanche, or howling storms, and echo and re-echo them from their rocky sides and gloomy caverns. Again, descending chains present to the panting soul every climate that may be wished for, from severest cold to torrid heat, with the various foliage and plants of every zone; where the (here exotic and dwarf-like) evergreen rhododendrons are native trees, covered with their gorgeous crimson or snow-white flowers, and thickly planted, like a miniature forest, on the verdant slopes, among roses and other shrubs, and more earth-bound flowers and herbs, of numerous kinds, all vying in apparently unnatural luxuriance, and forming a living and busy haunt of Nature's choicest menagerie, and its music of earth and air! Such delightful abodes are of frequent occurrence, with their background of majestic and gloomy pine forests, and ever-rising ranges of green and rocky and snow-crowned solitudes; yet, even in these, surrounded by so many of Nature's nobility, one could never feel alone! In travelling among such multitudes of untrodden mountains, and their interminable windings, with their ascents and descents, all these scenes, with varying features, more frequently and on a grander scale, burst upon the sight, than could possibly occur in our smaller European chains, grand and glorious though they be, creating an excitement and a pleasure for the mind, all of which, combined with a highly salubrious climate, and the sudden change from the burning plains, often cause the elastic spirits and spring of health most rapidly to supersede the chronic melancholy and reluctant step of disease.

In India, with such deeply contrasting variations of climate and of features, one may quickly transmigrate into the feelings of an Esquimaux or of an Indian. In a country like this, with all the wonders of Nature and many of Art, and where extremes thus meet, and the minds of its inhabitants are acute and active,

it can create but little wonder that imagination should have weaved its mythic and mystic web, and have caught in its meshes the susceptible yet subtle superstitions of a primitive age. And who would not luxuriate by penetrating into the past of this primeval antiquity? Or, who does not glow with enthusiasm, when her enlightened future beams upon the still black and distant horizon? India's primeval antiquity is a truth. When, with only her dark myths and mythology, mingled with some streaks of light, she became civilized while we were yet savage,—with her populous villages and agriculture,—her magnificent and teeming cities,—with man's handicraft almost in full perfection, while we were utterly untamed and unknown, and clothed in skins of beasts, while her inhabitants glittered in costumes of gold and silver of finest workmanship,—her beautiful temples towering to heaven, while an unhewn stone served our Druids for an altar! yea, perhaps thousands of years ere they were known, and when Rome was yet unborn, and even Greece herself was still for ages in the womb of time!

India's enlightened future must and will be a yet brighter and more enduring truth. When Brahma and the former all-conquering but now waning Crescent, shall make their millions bow before the sure, but apparently slow, advance of the Cross, and knowledge of every kind, thus breaking down the barriers which superstition and the accumulating clouds of ages have erected between the rising and the setting sun, and nations shall become encircled like the orb on which we dwell, as one family, and all of one right mind from east to west, like heaven's bright and cloudless canopy,—a divine and devoutly to-be-wished-for TRANSMIGRATION.

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